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OF ANCIENT
SCANDINAVIA

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By

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FOREWORD

THE native religion of the ancient Scandinavians was in its main features only a special form of that common to all the Germanic peoples, and this again was only a particular development of primitive beliefs and practices characteristic of the whole Aryan race. It is impossible to say how far back in time the special Germanic and Scandinavian developments of this religion may go, and of their earlier stages we have absolutely no knowledge beyond what may be doubtfully reached by the methods of comparison and inference. Even of the later stages our information is much more scanty than might be expected. Among the Goths, the southern Germans, and the Anglo-Saxons in Britain, paganism gave way to Christianity at so early a period, that very few details relating to it have been recorded by the civil or religious historians of these peoples; they were indeed more inclined to suppress than perpetuate any lingering knowledge of this kind.

The absence of such information is a great bar to the proper understanding of many points in Scandinavian religion, which, instead of being thus illuminated from without, has continually been forced to throw light on the heathen worship of the other Teutonic peoples.

As to the Scandinavian peoples themselves, it is only from a comparatively late period in the history of Europe that we have any real knowledge of them. They first became notorious at the close of the eighth century, when their unexpected piratical descents on Britain and France alarmed Western Christendom. Early in the ninth century the Saxon monk Ansgar ventured upon missionary enterprises into Scandinavia, at that time entirely a heathen region, and on two occasions reached the court of the Swedish king. About the middle of the same century Christianity began to make way in Denmark, which in another fifty years or so had become in the main a Christian land. During the tenth century the new faith began to make itself felt in Norway, but did not finally overcome the old religion until the beginning of the eleventh: in Iceland, which had been colonised from Norway, the adoption of Christianity took place somewhat suddenly in the year 1000. Sweden for the most part still remained

heathen, and did not fully accept the new religion until the twelfth century.

During these three centuries we have very little outside evidence as to the character of the religion professed by any of the Scandinavian peoples, and our knowledge of the beliefs and practices of northern heathenism is for the most part derived from native sources of a later date. These, while in some respects copious enough, by no means give all the information that could be desired, and on some important points their evidence is either scanty or very unsatisfactory. The deficiencies are to a large extent disguised, at first sight, by the fact that we possess abundant information as to Scandinavian *mythology*. Not only do the poems of the skalds (from the close of the ninth century onwards) abound in mythological allusions, but there also exists a systematic account of the subject in the work of Snorri Sturluson, commonly known as the 'Prose Edda,' written in Iceland about the year 1220. For the facts relating to the actual *religion*, on the other hand, we have to depend on the few pieces of outside evidence, and on fairly numerous, but not always reliable, statements in the biographical and historical prose writings commonly grouped together under the name of 'Sagas.' These works,

based on oral tradition of a very full and often very accurate nature, were written in Iceland during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and most of them are separated by more than a century and a half from the period of time to which they relate. As the authors were in every case Christians, and many of them were ecclesiastics, it is obvious that the late evidence thus afforded us is not to be absolutely relied upon. On the other hand, the tenacity of Icelandic tradition, the continuous interest in the poetic mythology, and the absence of any fanatical hatred of the old heathenism, make it possible to accept, with due reservations, many of the statements made in these writings. It is unfortunate, however, that Iceland alone of all the Scandinavian countries developed a literature of this kind. The result is that the information thus preserved relates for the most part only to Iceland itself and its mother-country, Norway. The heathen period in Denmark was so remote, and Sweden itself so slightly connected with Iceland, that comparatively little is recorded of either, although Sweden was still heathen when Icelandic literature began. This is the more to be regretted, as a fuller knowledge of the precise form which the old religion had in Denmark and Sweden would in

all probability solve some problems which are now obscure.

In the following account of the ancient Scandinavian religion, an attempt has been made to exhibit what is really known of the religious beliefs and practices of the people as distinct from the mythological fancies of the poets. With the evidence which we possess, it is impossible to determine how far the latter ever formed any part of a real popular religion: in some respects there seems to be a decided opposition between the two. The mythology, as it is found in the old poems and in the Prose Edda, has been the subject of much learned speculation, and various theories as to the original functions of the different gods and goddesses have from time to time been advanced, and have met with more or less acceptance. Much has also been written on the question how far the original conceptions had been modified under classic and Christian influences even before Christianity was finally accepted in the north. All discussion of these matters is here omitted in favour of a more direct investigation into the purely religious aspect of the old faith, so far as the existing materials admit of this.

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THE ANCIENT SCANDINAVIAN RELIGION

CHAPTER I

THE GREAT GODS: THOR AND ODIN

In common with the other Aryan races, the ancient Scandinavians recognised, as the basis of their religion, certain supernatural, usually unseen, powers ruling the world and exercising an influence on the affairs of mankind. In the ideas which prevailed as to the nature of these powers certain correspondences can be clearly traced in the various Aryan religions, in spite of the fact that our knowledge of them dates from widely different periods of history. Even the Romans, when they came into contact with the Germanic races, noticed some of the similarities, and applied the names of several of their own deities to the corresponding figures among the barbarian gods. When closer intercourse between Roman and German had established itself, the result of these

equations was made prominent in the names adopted by the latter for the days of the week, several of which, in most of the Germanic tongues, still bear witness to the old religion of the race. Thus the counterpart of the Roman *Mars* was found in the god *Tiw*, and consequently *dies Martis* was rendered by forms now represented in English by *Tuesday*. In the same way the Roman *Mercurius*, *Jupiter*, and *Venus* were identified with the Germanic gods called by the English *Wóden*, *Thunor*, and *Fríg*, whence the names of *Wednesday*, *Thursday*, and *Friday*. In making these equations, of course, neither German nor Roman did more than consider the most obvious points of resemblance between the deities; how close the correspondence actually was in each case it is impossible to say, as we know so little of the precise form which the native religion had among the southern Germans. It is only to a certain extent that the details suggested by these translations of the Roman names are supported by the evidence from the Scandinavian side, but it is extremely probable that some of the more striking discrepancies are due to difference in time as well as in place and people.

The three gods and the goddess whose names

are thus commemorated in the days of the week hold also a prominent place among the Scandinavian deities, where they appear under the names of Ty (*Týr*), Odin (*Óðinn*), Thor (*þórr*), and Frigg. But while Odin and Thor actually hold the place which they might be expected to occupy as objects of worship, the warlike deity Ty has apparently become of secondary importance. This is indicated not only by the native Scandinavian evidence, but also by what can be gleaned from external sources. In an Old English sermon[1] by the Abbot Ælfric, about the year 1000, the mention of some of the Roman deities leads the preacher to introduce the corresponding Danish names. Jove or Jupiter, he says, 'was called Thor among some peoples, and him the Danes love most of all.' Mercury, too, 'was honoured among all the heathens, and he is otherwise called Othon in Danish.' Of Ty there is no mention, although Mars is one of the Roman deities specified by name. In another homily by Ælfric there is the same identification of Thor and Odin, along with 'the foul goddess Venus, whom men call Frigg,' but here also Ty is ignored.

More than merely negative evidence, however,

[1] Based upon the Latin discourse *De correctione rusticorum*, by Martin of Bracara, who died in 580.

is supplied by another outside source, which is the leading contemporary account of Scandinavian religion, viz. that given by the German historian, Adam of Bremen (about the year 1075), in his description of the great temple of the Swedes at Upsala, and of the gods worshipped there. Here he writes, 'the people venerate the statues of three gods, so placed that the most powerful of them, Thor, has his seat in the middle of the bench. On either side of him Wodan and Fricco have their places. Of these the significations are as follows. Thor, they say, presides in the air, and governs thunder and lightning, winds and rains, fair weather and crops. The next, Wodan, that is "Fury," carries on wars and gives men valour against their enemies. The third is Fricco, bestowing peace and pleasure upon mortals.' The image of Wodan, he adds, resembled that of the Roman Mars; that of Thor suggested Jupiter, while Fricco was represented in a form resembling the minor deity Priapus.

The god here called Fricco was known to the Scandinavians themselves by the name of Frey (*Freyr*), and that the triad thus specified by Adam were in fact the chief deities worshipped in the later stages of Scandinavian religion is abundantly proved by the native evidence. The

identification of Odin with Mars in place of Mercury is also in full accordance with the later beliefs: in other words, Odin has taken the place of Ty as the chief war-god. Whether this was the main reason for the admission of Frey as third member of the supreme triad is uncertain, the earlier position of this god being altogether unknown. Thor, it will be noticed, still retains his place as the counterpart of the Roman Jupiter, and stands between the other two gods, as being the most powerful. The precise relationship, however, between Thor and Odin is not by any means so simple as this statement would suggest, and forms indeed one of the most difficult questions connected with the subject. This will be most clearly brought out by a detailed account of the relative place assigned to each of them in religious practice on the one hand, and in mythological accounts on the other; and the most correct impression of the facts will probably be obtained by dealing first with Thor.

The pre-eminence assigned to this god by Ælfric and Adam of Bremen is quite in accordance with what can fairly be inferred from the native historical sources. A considerable number of passages in the sagas yield combined proof that by the people at large Thor was regarded as the chief deity, at least

in Norway and Iceland: for Sweden and Denmark the evidence is less conclusive, but seems to point in the same direction. It is of great significance, for example, that in all the Scandinavian countries the name of Thor is the one which is most frequently used as a formative element in the names of persons (such as Thor-kell, Stein-thor), and these were evidently quite as common in Sweden and Denmark as in Norway and Iceland. On the other hand, the name of Odin is scarcely ever employed, only one or two instances being found among the Danes and Swedes. Names with Frey- as their first element are more frequent, but are in small proportion compared with those in Thor-. In Danish and Swedish place-names, too, the predominance of Thor is very marked, although Odin and Frey are better represented here than in the case of the personal names. In Norway and Iceland place-names of this kind are rare, but Thorsness and Thorsmark occur in the latter country. The frequency with which Thor's hammer (see below) is represented on Danish and Swedish runic monuments, and the occurrence on ancient Danish stones of the formula 'May Thor hallow this monument' (or 'these runes'), also indicate that the position of this deity was much the same among all branches of the Scandinavian people.

In Denmark, too, there are distinct traces of a tendency to hold local assemblies on the day named after the god; in Iceland this was the day on which the famous *Al-thing* (the legal and legislative assembly of the whole people) began every year, ten weeks after the first day of summer, and in Norway the great law-assembly of the western districts also began its meetings on a Thursday.

For Norway and Iceland there is a considerable amount of more direct evidence than this. In several of the Icelandic historical writings it is expressly stated that some of the leading colonists had a special regard for Thor and his worship. Of one who came from the island of Mostr, on the south-western coast of Norway, it is told that he had the custody of Thor's temple there, and was a 'great friend' of the god, on which account he was called Thorolf (= *Thor-wolf*). This Thorolf fell out with King Harald, and went to inquire of Thor, 'his loving friend,' whether he should make terms with the king or leave the country. The oracle directed him to go to Iceland. He pulled down the temple, and took with him most of the timber, as well as the earth from under the pedestal on which Thor had been seated. On coming near Iceland, he threw overboard the two

chief pillars of the temple, on one of which the image of Thor was carved, and declared he would settle wherever Thor made these come ashore. After landing on the south side of Broadfirth, they found that Thor had come ashore with the pillars on a headland, to which they then gave the name of Thor's-ness, while a river in the neighbourhood was also named after the god. When this Thorolf had a son in his old age, he gave him to his friend Thor, and called him Thorstein. Thorstein also gave his own son to Thor, 'and said he should be a temple-priest, and called him Thorgrim.' Another son of Thorolf's sacrificed to Thor, that he might send him pillars for his house, 'and gave his son for this,' which probably means that he also dedicated his son to the god, though one account appears to imply that he actually offered him in sacrifice.

Of another settler, Helgi the Lean, who was brought up in Ireland, it is stated that when he came in sight of Iceland, he inquired of Thor where he should land; the oracle directed him to Eyafirth, and would allow him to go nowhere else. Before they came in sight of the firth, Helgi's son asked him whether he would have obeyed Thor's directions if he had sent him to winter in the Arctic Ocean. Yet Helgi was not

absolutely devoted to Thor, as he also believed in Christ, and even called his Icelandic homestead by the name of Christness. It was to Thor, however, that he turned for aid in sea-faring and difficult enterprises, and in all matters that he considered to be of most importance.

Thorolf and Helgi were not the only settlers who allowed Thor to fix the place of their habitation in Iceland, and one in the south of the island also consecrated all his land to Thor and called it Thor's-mark. The tendency to appeal to Thor for help in time of need is further illustrated by an incident recorded as having taken place during the Wineland expedition of 1007-8. The explorers were in great straits for want of food, and had prayed for help, which seemed long in coming. One of the party, named Thorhall, was found by the others on the peak of a cliff, looking up to the sky, and muttering something, besides making strange gestures of which he would give no explanation. Shortly afterwards a whale came ashore, and Thorhall said, 'The red-bearded one was stronger now than your Christ. I have got this for my poetry that I made about Thor. He has seldom failed me.'

This contrasting of Thor with Christ is a trait which appears in other narratives, and is signi-

ficant of the place which the god held in the old religion. In the struggle between heathenism and Christianity in the Scandinavian countries it is usually Thor, the red-bearded one, who is the champion of the primitive faith and its most powerful representative. The cases in which Odin takes this place have a much more legendary character, and are more likely to be due to later invention. It was Thor whom the believers in the old faith expressly put forward as a rival to the God of the Christians. In the early part of the eleventh century, when King Olaf Haraldsson was doing his utmost to christianise Norway, the following words are represented as having been spoken by a powerful chief named Gudbrand: 'There is come hither a man named Olaf to offer us another faith than the one we had, and to break all our gods in pieces, and he says that he has a greater and mightier god. It is a marvel that the earth does not open under him when he dares to say such things, and that our gods let him go any further. I expect, if we carry Thor out of our temple where he stands, and where he has always stood by us, that as soon as he looks on Olaf and his men, then *his* god and himself and his men will melt away and come to nought.' So also when Thangbrand the

priest went to Iceland on his missionary enterprise in 997, he met a woman who preached heathendom to him at great length, and asked him, 'Have you not heard that Thor challenged Christ to single combat, and He dared not fight with Thor?' When Thangbrand's ship was destroyed by a violent storm, it was to Thor that the credit of the accident was assigned.

The firm hold which Thor had upon the minds of his worshippers is also illustrated by the way in which some of the converts to Christianity felt uneasy at abandoning him. Thorgils of Flói, in the south-west of Iceland, was one of the first to accept the new faith, and more than once he dreamed that Thor came to him with reproaches and threats for this desertion. Thorgils was firm, and defied the angry god, but his later perils at sea were believed by his companions to be the work of Thor, and some of them even wished to sacrifice to him for a fair wind, saying that people had fared much better when they made offerings to him.

The prominent place held by the worship of Thor in the old religion is also indicated by the frequent mention of images of the god in various temples (as will appear in a later chapter); this fact acquires special significance when contrasted

with the lack of similar statements regarding Odin. It is also extremely probable that it was Thor, and not Odin, to whom the vague names of 'Land-god' (*Land-áss*) and 'The Almighty God' were given; the latter was used, coupled with the names of Frey and Njörd, in an old oath-formula.

Having thus made the position of Thor among the Scandinavian gods as clear as the evidence admits of, it remains to show what manner of god his worshippers supposed him to be. On this point there is unfortunately less direct evidence than could be wished. In origin Thor was the thunder-god, and it is therefore natural to find him spoken of as 'the strongest of all the gods.' His weapon, the thunderbolt, was imagined as a hammer, mythologically known by the name of *Mjölnir*, and was especially used by him to protect the gods and men against giants and other evil monsters. To grasp it with he had iron gloves, and he was also possessed of a girdle of might which increased his strength twofold. In his journeys, of which the mythological writers have a good deal to say, he sometimes rode in a chariot drawn by two goats. Of these details there is very little trace in historical sources, although one passage (of doubtful value) speaks of an image of Thor seated in his chariot. The

hammer, however, was certainly the distinctive symbol of the god, and representations of it were evidently in common use as sacred and protective marks. Not only is it frequently cut on stone monuments, but small figures of it were apparently used as amulets, of which a number have been found in Denmark and Sweden. When the Danish prince Magnus returned from an expedition into the heathen districts of Sweden in 1123, he brought back with him as trophies some Thor's hammers of metal. It is not clear how far such models of the hammer were used in religious ceremonies; that it was employed at weddings 'to hallow the bride' appears to be highly probable, but there is no direct historical evidence to prove it.

The form in which the hammer was commonly represented easily led to its association with the Christian mark of the cross. At a festival held in Norway in 952, Earl Sigurd dedicated the first toast to Odin, and after drinking from the horn handed it to King Hákon, who was a Christian. When the king took it, he made the mark of the cross over it. The heathens present protested against this, and Earl Sigurd attempted to satisfy them by saying, 'The king does like all those who trust to their own might and strength, and

consecrate their toast to Thor. He made the mark of the hammer over it before he drank.'

The relationship of Thor to Odin, and the precise position of the latter among the Scandinavian gods, must now be more closely considered. In the sermon by Ælfric already cited there is an interesting remark bearing on this, in these words: 'Now the Danes in their delusion say that Jove, whom they call Thor, was the son of Mercury, whom they call Odin, but they are not right in this' (*i.e.* according to Roman mythology).[1] Ælfric's statement is in perfect accordance with the old Scandinavian myths, which represent Thor as the son of Odin and Earth, a relationship also attested by various poetical designations of the god. This is not at all what the historical evidence would lead us to expect, but the mythological account of Odin presents a still more striking contrast to what has been brought forward above as to the position of Thor. 'Odin,' says Snorri, 'is the highest and eldest of the gods; he rules over all things, and for as mighty as the other gods are, they all serve him as children do their father. . . . Odin is called Allfather, because he is the father of all the gods.'

[1] This discrepancy between the Roman and Scandinavian myths is also noticed by Saxo Grammaticus.

It is indeed quite clear that the whole mythological system expounded by Snorri, and implied in all the old Scandinavian poetry, centres on the idea of Odin as the supreme god. As such he has two important sides to his nature. On the one hand he is a war-god, who assigns victory or defeat to men, and who takes the slain warriors to live with himself in Valhall; 'he is also called Val-father, because all those who fall in battle are his chosen sons: to them he gives places in Valhall and Vingolf,' says Snorri. On the other hand he is a god of wisdom and cunning, knowing all things, and a god of poetry whom the skalds regard as the author of their art. So far as the historical evidence is strong enough to prove anything regarding Odin, it indicates that a belief in both of these aspects was really a part of the old religion. We have already seen that Adam of Bremen describes Odin as the war-god among the Swedes, and Snorri also says that the Swedes thought he often appeared to them before great battles; 'to some he gave victory, and some he invited to himself, and either lot was thought good.' This association of Odin with war, and the assignation to him of all those who were slain in battle, are very prominent in the mythical sagas, which may be accepted as representing a genuine

tradition in this respect, however much the details may be due to later invention. In these sagas one also finds the connection of Odin with death by hanging, which appears in some of his poetic names, and must be regarded as a real belief.

The purely historical evidence is, however, very limited. Perhaps the only mention of an actual offering to Odin is that found in the account of Earl Hákon's doings after he had, under compulsion, accepted Christianity in Denmark in 975. On leaving that country, he sailed round to the east coast of Sweden, landed there, and made a great sacrifice. 'Then two ravens came flying and croaked loudly, and the earl thought it certain that Odin had accepted the sacrifice, and that he would have success in fighting.' It is very probable, however, that sacrifices to this god were more common among the Danes and Swedes than among the Norwegians, and that this may account for the lack of reference to them in the Icelandic writings.

That the belief in Valhall was a real one is clearly shown by one or two passages in the sagas. King Hákon the Good had been a Christian, though latterly he had not made his religion prominent, in order to avoid offending his heathen subjects. When he was killed in battle in 961, he

was laid in the grave-mound with all his weapons and best array. 'They made such speeches at his burying as it was the custom of heathen men to make, and sent him off on the way to Valhall.' A poem on Hákon's death and his reception by Odin in Valhall, which was composed at the time by one of his skalds, gives a very fine expression to the belief, which is also the leading theme in an earlier poem on the death of King Eirík in 954. Even some who had not been killed in battle were apparently thought of as going to Odin in Valhall, if the passage in the saga of Gísli may be relied upon, in which Thorgrím is represented as saying, 'It is the custom to tie hell-shoes on men when they shall go to Valhall, and I will do that with Véstein' (who had been murdered in his bed). There is also a reference to the belief in Njál's saga, in the words of Högni, 'I intend to take the halbert to my father' (Gunnarr, who had been killed shortly before this), 'and let him have it to Valhall and bear it there at the weapon-thing.' The same saga also represents Earl Hákon in Norway, when he found his temple burned down, as saying, 'The man who has done this will be driven away from Valhall, and never get entrance there.' It is doubtful, however, whether much weight can be

given to these passages. The old practice of beginning a battle by throwing a spear over the enemy is in some of the mythical sagas explained as a dedication of them to Odin, and it is possible that this idea may be correct.

It is remarkable that in the Icelandic sources there is no clear evidence for a general worship of Odin in Norway or Iceland. In his account of the old festivals Snorri states that the first toast which went round was consecrated to Odin, and was drunk 'for victory and for power to their king.' And he also says that at the festival at Hladir in 952 Earl Sigurd 'consecrated the first toast to Odin.' The accuracy of Snorri's account has been questioned, but even if it is correct, it does not definitely establish Odin's position in popular belief. Among the Icelanders themselves there is nothing like the same evidence to show that Odin was generally held in esteem and veneration as there is in the case of Thor; and it is noticeable that in the few cases where a belief in, and reliance on, Odin are expressed, the speaker is usually a poet. Thus Egil Skallagrímsson, when he had suffered at the hands of King Eirík (about 934), expresses in a verse his wish that 'the gods and Odin' may be angry with the king: in the second half of the verse Frey

and Njörd are also mentioned by name. The poet Hallfred, who accepted Christianity in Norway in 996, makes several references in his verses to his former worship of Odin, but in words which clearly indicate that his capacity of skald had much to do with this. When he was afterwards accused of being still a heathen, it was the possession of 'an image of Thor' which formed one of the charges against him. It is, however, stated that previous to their becoming Christians Hallfred and his companions made a vow 'to give much money to Frey if they reached Sweden, or to Thor and Odin if they got to Iceland.' Kjartan Olafsson is also made to speak of Thor and Odin together, and Odin (along with Freyja) is specified in the abusive verse by Hjalfi Skeggjason (999), which led to his prosecution for blasphemy against the gods. On the other hand there is no mention in any saga of any temple, image, or special priest of Odin in any part of Iceland.

That the attribution of the art of poetry to Odin, and his consequent position as the special god of poets, was no mere conventional figment of the skalds is best attested by Egil's poem on the loss of his sons. Towards the end of this the poet expresses his resentment against 'the lord of the spear,' in whom he had confidently trusted before

he sent this loss upon him, and so destroyed the friendship between them. Now he has no pleasure in worshipping Odin, 'yet,' he adds, 'Mimir's friend has given me recompense for my woes: he gave me an art' (that of poetry) 'free from fault and stain.'

As the above will show, there is a real difficulty in reconciling the historical statements as to the worship of Odin and Thor with the relative positions assigned to them in the old mythology. The explanation which seems to clear away this difficulty in the most satisfactory manner is the suggestion that Thor and Odin really belong to different stages in the development of Scandinavian religion. On this view Thor was originally the chief god, and to a certain extent continued to hold this position to the end. His supremacy, however, was in the later period of heathenism seriously threatened by the growing cult of Odin, which was at first foreign to the Scandinavian peoples, and was received by them from the South Germanic races. This would easily account for the seemingly greater popularity of Odin among the Danes and Swedes than among the Norwegians and Icelanders, to whom the new cult would be later in spreading. In this connection it may be noted that some of the poetic

names for Odin, such as 'the friend of the Gauts,' 'Tyr of the Gauts' (as well as the simple *Gauti* and *Gautr*), appear to indicate that his worship was associated with the people of that name in southern Sweden. It was in Gautland that the poet Hallfred was nearly sacrificed to Odin in 997, and here also in 1018 the poet Sigvat was refused admission to a farm where a sacrifice was taking place, because they 'were afraid of Odin's anger.' It may even be significant that Earl Hákon's sacrifice already mentioned was performed on the coast of Gautland.

The ninth and tenth centuries were a period of new development and great changes within the Scandinavian countries. The Viking expeditions brought a large part of the population into direct contact with war and battle, while the former petty kings disappeared, or lost most of their importance, before strong rulers like Gorm in Denmark or Harald in Norway. In the courts of these new sovereigns there was a life and splendour previously unknown in the north, and under the royal favour the art of poetry flourished to a remarkable extent. It appears fairly certain that in these surroundings the cult of Odin found most favour, and that the conceptions of the god which meet us in the mythology were developed

among men who found a pleasure both in fighting and in poetry, and who modelled their ideas of the warlike deity on the monarch to whose court they attached themselves. Odin was thus the god of the warrior, the poet, and the friend of kings, while Thor retained his former place in the hearts of those who still followed the old way of life in the secluded valleys of Norway or Iceland. Something of this distinctly appears in the figures of the two gods as they are presented in the old poems and legends. Odin bears all the stamp of the new life and culture about him; Thor is rather a sturdy yeoman of the old unpolished type. Odin is a ruler in whom knowledge and power are equally combined; Thor has little more to rely upon than his bodily strength. Even in small matters the contrast is marked: Odin lives by wine alone, while Thor eats the flesh of his goats and drinks the homely ale. Odin's weapon is the spear; Thor's is the more primitive hammer. It is to Odin that all the warriors go after death; Thor gets only the thralls. In some of the poems there is an obvious tendency to assign to Thor an undignified and even ludicrous part, which is strongly at variance with the veneration in which he was actually held, as we have seen above. It would, perhaps, be unsafe to attach very much

importance to this, as it is quite uncertain how far these poems can be accepted as evidence for religious beliefs. It is perhaps more significant that while writers like Snorri tell how Odin and various other gods (such as Njörd and Frey) came from the south-east into Denmark and Sweden, there is no similar account as regards Thor. In the historical period, too, there were distinguished families in Sweden and Norway whose genealogy was traced back to Odin and Frey, while no one claimed descent from Thor. Both of these facts may reasonably be regarded as supporting the view that Odin belongs to a later period in the history of Scandinavia than Thor, and some such explanation appears to be requisite to account for the striking differences in the traditional statements regarding the two chief gods of the old religion.

CHAPTER II

THE REMAINING GODS AND OTHER OBJECTS OF WORSHIP

The third god mentioned by Adam of Bremen as worshipped at Upsala is (Fricco or) Frey, a name which appears to be identical with the Teutonic word represented in Old English by *fréa*, lord or king. Adam's statement is fully confirmed by the Icelandic sources, and there are also general references to the prevalence of the cult in Sweden.[1] In a somewhat legendary source it is even stated that an image of Frey, which was worshipped at Thrandheim in Norway, had been sent there from Sweden. The story of Gunnar Helming also makes mention of an image of Frey in Sweden which was carried about the country, and to which sacrifices were offered, but the value of the statement is very doubtful. Saxo Grammaticus, speaking of a sacrifice of black oxen offered to

[1] Compare the vow of Hallfred and his companions mentioned on p. 19.

Frey by the mythical hero Hading, adds that this had continued to be a yearly custom, and 'the Swedes call it *Fröblod,' i.e.* Frey's sacrifice. The frequent occurrence of *Frey-* in Swedish (and Danish) place-names has been already mentioned, and indicates the prevalence of the cult in both of these countries.

The worship of Frey, however, must also have been very popular in Norway, from which it passed to Iceland with the early settlers. As late as 998 the men of Thrandheim are represented as refusing to break their image of Frey at the command of King Olaf, 'because we have long served him and he has done well by us. He often talked with us, and told us things to come, and gave us peace and plenty.' At the great festivals it was customary to drink to Frey (along with Njörd) in order to secure peace and prosperity. A talisman on which the image of Frey was 'marked in silver' is mentioned as having been owned by one of the petty kings of Norway about 872; this was given by King Harald to Ingimund, and tradition associated it in a mysterious way with the place where the latter finally settled in Iceland.

In Iceland itself the traces of a popular cult of Frey are very clear, and more than one prominent

person mentioned in the sagas bears the title of *Freys-goði*, or 'priest of Frey.' Of one of these, Thorgrím, brother-in-law of Gísli Súrsson, the saga says that 'he intended to hold a festival at the beginning of winter, and greet the winter, and sacrifice to Frey.' When Thorgrím was murdered, and had been laid in a grave-mound, it was noticed that snow never lay on the south or west sides of the mound, and the ground never froze there: 'and it was supposed that he was so highly esteemed by Frey for the offerings he made to him, that the god did not wish it to freeze between them.' Great attachment to this deity also appears in the story of Hrafnkel, who loved no other god more than Frey, and gave to him joint possession with himself of all his most valuable things. Among these was a horse, which on that account bore the name of *Freyfaxi*. Another Freyfaxi belonged to Brand in Vatnsdal, and most people believed that he had a religious reverence for the horse. Horses owned by Frey are also mentioned as existing in Thrandheim in the days of Olaf Tryggvason (about 996).

At Eyafirth in Iceland there was a temple of Frey, which is mentioned several times in the saga of Víga-Glúm. Thorkel, says the story, went to Frey's temple, taking with him an old ox, and

addressed the god thus: 'Frey,' said he, 'you have long been my confidant, and have received many gifts from me, and repaid me well. Now I give you this ox, so that it may come to pass that Glúm will leave this land as much under compulsion as I do now. And show me now some token whether you receive this or not.' Thereupon the ox bellowed, and fell down dead, and Thorkel then believed that Frey had accepted his gift. The saga also mentions that Frey would not allow outlaws to make his temple there a sanctuary. Glúm himself afterwards had a dream that many men had come there to see Frey. He asked who they were, and they said, 'We are your departed kinsfolk, and are making intercession with Frey that you may not be driven away from this ground; but Frey answers shortly and angrily, and recalls the ox that Thorkel gave him.' Then Glúm awoke, and had less liking for Frey all the rest of his life.

According to the mythological accounts, Frey was the son of Njörd and brother of Freyja. He had great personal beauty in addition to his divine powers. 'He rules over rain and sunshine and the produce of the earth, and it is good to call on him for peace and plenty. He also has power over the prosperity of men.' He was

believed to own the ship *Skíðblaðnir*, and to ride on the boar *Gullinbursti* (Golden-bristle). This association of Frey with the boar appears also in the following passage of one of the mythical sagas (*Hervarar Saga*): 'King Heidrek sacrificed to Frey; he should give to him the largest boar that could be got. They considered it so holy, that over its bristles they took an oath about all important matters. That boar was sacrificed by way of an atonement; on Christmas eve it was led into the hall before the king, and men then laid their hands on its bristles and made their vows.' In another and earlier mention of the *sónargöltr* (boar of atonement), however, it is not stated that the practice was connected with the cult of Frey, and in the absence of direct historical evidence the reality or significance of the rite remains doubtful.

As mentioned above, the mythology regarded Frey as the son of Njörd (*Njörðr*), a god of whom very little is really known. It has been supposed that the *Nerthus*, mentioned by Tacitus as being worshipped in common by a number of Germanic tribes, is the same as Njörd, but the fact that Tacitus speaks of Nerthus as a goddess and explains the name as meaning Mother Earth, makes the identification a very doubtful one.

According to Snorri, Njörd 'rules over the course of the wind and calms the sea and fire. He is to be called on for voyaging and fishing. He is so rich and wealthy that he may give lands and treasure to whom he will.'

The worship of Njörd in Sweden and Norway is implied in the fact that places named after him are found in certain parts of these countries. When he is mentioned in the Icelandic writings, it is usually in conjunction with Frey. The practice of drinking the second toast to Njörd and Frey 'for peace and plenty' has been already mentioned. In the old heathen form of oath, taken by suitors and others at the legal assemblies, the deities invoked were 'Frey and Njörd and the Almighty God' (probably Thor). The two names are also combined by Egil in a verse (of 934) in which he prays that Frey and Njörd may be angry with King Eirík, while in one of his poems (about 962) he refers to them as the givers of wealth. With this may be compared the proverbial expression 'as rich as Njörd,' which occurs in old Icelandic. In one of Hallfred's verses (of 996) Frey and Njörd, Odin, Thor, and Freyja, are all mentioned together in contrast with God and Christ: in another (of the same time) the poet says, 'I am forced away from Njörd's offspring

and made to pray to Christ.' These passages are sufficient to show that the cult of Njörd was closely connected with that of Frey, and make it probable that he was a deity of some importance even in the popular religion, but at best he remains a somewhat vague figure among the Scandinavian gods.

Of the remaining gods known to us from the mythology there are only the faintest traces in the historical sources. Even the original war-god Ty was so completely supplanted by Odin, that no distinct evidence is to be found for his worship in any part of Scandinavia, although Snorri describes him as 'the bravest and stoutest-hearted of the gods,' who had a great share in deciding the victory in battle; 'on him it is good for men of valour to call.' His name was, however, retained in poetic appellations of men (sometimes even of Odin), and was used in the epithets *týr-hraustr* for a very brave man, and *týr-spakr* for a clever one.

Still more uncertain is the question how far such deities as Heimdall, the wakeful warder of the gods, Bragi, the special god of poetry, and some others, really held a place in ordinary religious belief as distinct from the myth-creating fancy of the poets. Even such a striking

mythological figure as the peace-maker Baldr, the most beautiful and lovable of all the gods, is strikingly ignored in all historical references to the old worship (the statements in Frithjof's saga being of no value in this respect). This is also the case with nearly all the goddesses, not excepting Frigg herself, the wife of Odin, the mother of Baldr, and the highest of them all, according to Snorri. It would appear, however, that Frigg had to some extent retired into the background before another goddess Freyja, the sister of Frey. We have already seen that when the days of the week received their Germanic names it was Frigg who was equated with the Roman Venus; but in the Scandinavian mythology it is Freyja, not Frigg, who is the goddess of love. Snorri describes Freyja as riding in a chariot drawn by two cats, 'and wheresoever she rides to battle, she has half the slain and Odin the other half.' This association of Freyja with Odin, which seems to imply that Frigg was almost on the point of being displaced by a rival goddess, also appears in the verse for which Hjalti Skeggjason was found guilty of blasphemy. It is implied, too, in a passage in Egil's saga, in which Thorgerd is represented as saying, 'I have had no supper, and will have none, until I come to Freyja. I know no better

counsel for myself than my father's: I will not live after my father and brother.' The fact, too, that in the mythical sagas Freyja is almost the only goddess mentioned, indicates that her name had been remembered as one of special note in the old religion.

To their chief deities the ancient Scandinavians gave the general name of *goð* (equivalent to the English *god*), or *æsir* (plural of *áss*). Both of these appellations were in common use as the first element in personal names, such as *Goð-mundr* (later *Guð-*) or *Ásmundr*. In the Edda, however, the *æsir* are distinguished from another race of gods, the *vanir*, to whom Njörd and Frey belonged. Whether this distinction had any bearing on the popular religion does not appear. Other names which occur in the poetic or mythological sources are *regin* or *rögn*, denoting their decisive or guiding powers, and *bönd* or *höpt*, which imply a binding or constraining might; the goddesses are usually known by the name of *ásynjur*. The Edda speaks of twelve chief gods, but it may be doubted whether the number was ever definitely fixed, or that it was uniform in all parts of Scandinavia.

In addition to the greater gods various supernatural powers were recognised by the Scandi-

navians as having influence for good or evil upon human fortunes, and to some extent at least worship was paid to these. This is clearest in the case of the *dísir*, female guardian spirits of individuals or families, to whom formal sacrifice was made under the name of *dísablót*. It is less certain that the belief in the *nornir*, or Fates, usually thought of as three sisters, can properly be regarded as belonging to religion, though its influence was evidently a powerful one. A belief in the *valkyrjur*, or war-maidens, who were present at battles and sometimes appeared to the combatants, naturally connects itself with the cult of Odin, but here also the evidence for a religious feeling accompanying the belief is lacking.

It is not quite clear what place is to be assigned to the *landvættir*, who were supposed to watch over and protect various parts of the country, and whose presence and favour were reckoned to be of so much importance, that the old heathen law of Iceland (framed about 930) began with a provision relating to them. It enacted that 'men should not have ships with heads on them, or if they did, they should take them off before they came in sight of land, and not approach the shore with gaping heads or yawning snouts by which the *landvættir* might be scared.' When Egil was

incensed against King Eirík of Norway, he set up a *níðstöng*, or insulting post, and declared that he directed it not only against the king and queen, but also against 'those *landvættir* who inhabit this land, that they may all go astray and none of them find his home, until they drive Eirík and Gunnhild out of the country.' Of the son of a settler in the south-west of Iceland it is said that second-sighted men saw the *landvættir* accompany him when he went to the assembly, while they followed his brothers in hunting or fishing. The *landvættir* were also credited with having appeared to a wizard whom the Danish king sent to Iceland about 980, and with having prevented him from landing on its shores. In view of all this, it is extremely probable that these supposed beings may have been actually worshipped, but of this there is no positive evidence.

A somewhat mysterious place among the minor deities is held by two sisters named Thorgerd and Irpa, the former of whom also bears the epithet of *Hölgabrúðr*, apparently meaning 'Hölgi's bride.' All that is known of these is that they are alleged to have been worshipped by Earl Hákon of Norway, in the latter half of the tenth century. It is not improbable that their worship may have been confined to that part of Norway

(in Thrandheim) in which Hákon lived, or that they were *dísir* connected with the family to which he belonged. In the very legendary account of the battle which Hákon fought against the vikings of Jómsborg in 985, it is told that when he found the battle going against him 'he called upon his confidant Thorgerd, but she was angry with him and would not hear him.' It was only when propitiated by the sacrifice of Hákon's own son that she consented to aid him. She and her sister Irpa were then seen by second-sighted men fighting on the earl's side. The great reverence which the earl was believed to have felt for the sisters also appears strongly in the accounts relating to the images of them which he had in his temples; to that of Thorgerd he prostrated himself in prayer and made offerings of silver.

Among the Scandinavians, as among other branches of the Aryan race, the practice of hero-worship appears to have been known. Adam of Bremen records it as occurring among the Swedes, who in the life of St. Ansgar are also said to have paid divine honours to one of their kings (Erik), assigning to him a temple and special priests. In Norway it is mentioned that offerings were made on the grave-mound of Olaf, at one time king in

Vestfold; and probably some kind of religious feeling towards the deceased person is implied in the worship of grave-mounds, which was sufficiently prevalent to be specially forbidden in the early Christian law of Norway. One of the early settlers in the Færöes, Grím Kamban, is also said to have been worshipped after his death on account of his popularity.

Not only human beings, but even animals, were perhaps occasionally worshipped by individuals. An old tradition related that a King Ögvald, in the west of Norway, chiefly worshipped a cow, and took it about with him wherever he went; and at a later and more historical date Hárek of Rein is said to have worshipped an ox. When Floki set out to look for Iceland he sacrificed to three ravens, which he then took on board with him that they might show him the way. It may also be noted that, if a very curious legend can be depended on, there were even traces of phallic worship in Norway as late as the days of Olaf the Saint (about 1020).

An old account of the heathen period in Gotland (off the eastern coast of Sweden) begins with the words, 'before that time and long after men believed in groves and grave-mounds, holy places and enclosures, and in the heathen gods.'

The prominence here given to sacred places appears to be in accordance with the facts recorded elsewhere. In the early Christian law of Norway, for example, cairns (*hörgar*) as objects of worship are condemned along with grave-mounds, and sacred cairns are also named in some Icelandic sources. In these also a single stone is sometimes mentioned as being worshipped, the most notable instance being that in *Kristni Saga*, where it is said, 'At Giljá,' in the north of Iceland, 'stood the stone that the family had worshipped, and alleged that their *ár*-man lived in it. Codran declared that he would not be baptized until he knew which was the more powerful, the bishop or the *ár*-man in the stone. The bishop then went to the stone, and chanted over it till it broke asunder. Then Codran considered that the *ár*-man was vanquished.' (The precise meaning of '*ár*-man' here is uncertain: usually the word means 'steward,' but in this case it may be derived from *ár* in the sense of good or plentiful years.) Of an Icelandic settler in the tenth century it is also told that he 'took Flateydale up to the War-stones (*Gunnsteinar*), and worshipped them.' Close beside him was another settler who worshipped a grove, while one in another part of the island, who is described as a

great sacrificer, paid his devotions to a waterfall, into which all remains of food were thrown.

In connection with this worship of natural objects may be noticed the curious belief in Iceland that certain families passed after death into hills or hillocks in their district. This is told, for example, of Thorolf who settled Thorsness and had great reverence for the hill there: 'He called it Holy-fell, and believed that he would go there when he died, and all his kinsmen on the ness.' Even the kinsmen of Aud, who was a Christian, had great religious faith in some hillocks on which she had erected crosses: 'They believed that they should die into these hillocks, and Thord Gellir was led into them before his sons took their place among men, as is told in his saga.'

CHAPTER III

TEMPLES AND IMAGES

In common with other peoples, the ancient Scandinavians erected special buildings in which to worship their gods, and in which their images were placed. These temples (called *hof*, *goða-hof*, *goða-hús*, and *blót-hús*) must not be thought of as in any way comparable to those erected by the more cultured Aryan races, such as the Greeks and Romans. It is true that Adam of Bremen describes that at Upsala in Sweden, which he calls *nobilissimum templum*, as being 'all of gold,' while a note to the passage says that it was surrounded by 'a golden chain hanging on the pinnacles of the building, and seen glittering afar by those who approach the place'; but it is very doubtful how far this description is trustworthy. In any case the Upsala temple would naturally be much superior to those in less central localities; from other indications it appears to have

been specially well endowed with landed and other property. Unfortunately there is no evidence from which any general idea of the heathen temples in Sweden and Denmark can be obtained. In Norway they were, like the ordinary houses, constructed of timber, and in many cases were probably of small size and insignificant appearance. Mention has already been made of the temple of Thor in the island of Mostr, which Thorolf took down and carried off to Iceland when he went to settle there. The same thing is told of Thorhadd, who was priest at Mærin in Thrandheim; he also took down the temple, and carried with him the temple-mould and the chief pillars. Some of the buildings, no doubt, may have been more imposing, and even to some extent furnished with costly ornaments. When Olaf Tryggvason gave orders to burn down Earl Hákon's temple at Hladir, 'he made them take all the treasure and ornaments out of the temple and off the images of the gods.' A large gold ring was also removed from the temple door, but it afterwards proved to be only brass internally. It may also be noted that various accounts of temples speak of them as being lighted by glass windows 'so that there was no shadow anywhere in them.' Beside the great temple at Upsala

there was a sacred grove, and the evidence of place-names shows that similar groves existed elsewhere in Sweden and Denmark: as regards Norway and Iceland there is no positive information on this head.

Of the temple which Thorolf erected at his Icelandic home on Thorsness an interesting description is given in *Eyrbyggja Saga*, which is thus the chief source for what knowledge we have on the subject. It is described as a great house, with doors on the side-walls, nearer to one end of it than the other. In from these doors stood the chief pillars, and in these there were nails, which were known by the name of *regin*-nails (*regin* was one of the names for the gods, but its precise meaning here is not certain). The part of the building lying inward from these pillars was a great sanctuary. At the inner end there was a smaller building 'of the same form as the choir in churches is now'; and here, in the middle of the floor, stood a pedestal of the nature of an altar. On this lay a ring weighing two ounces, on which all oaths had to be sworn. It was the duty of the temple-priest to wear this ring on his hand at all assemblies. On the pedestal stood also the sacrificial bowl (*hlaut-bolli*), and in this were placed the sacrificial twigs

(*hlaut-teinar*), by means of which the blood of the sacrifice (*hlaut-blóð*) was sprinkled upon those present at the ceremony. 'This was the blood from those animals that were offered to the gods.' Round about this altar the images of the gods were arranged. All those living in the district had to pay toll to the temple, and were bound to attend the temple-priest on all expeditions, 'as thingmen are now bound to attend their chiefs.' On the other hand, the priest had to keep up the temple and not allow it to fall into decay, and to hold in it the sacrificial feasts.

In the late and fictitious *Kjalnesinga Saga* there is given a similar description of a temple, which may possibly have some basis in local tradition. It is described as having been a hundred and twenty feet long, and sixty broad. At the inner end was a circular annex, the shape of which suggested a cap or hood; this had windows, and was hung with tapestry. Thor was the chief god there, and stood in the middle, with the other gods on each side of him. In front of them was an altar with an iron plate on the top, on which a fire was kept constantly burning: 'they called that hallowed fire.' The silver ring on which oaths were sworn, and the bowl for the sacrificial blood, are also mentioned, but the

account of them may be derived from the passage in *Eyrbyggja Saga* already quoted.

In a much more reliable source, *Landnámabók*, there occurs the following passage relating to the ring and its use. 'A ring of two ounces or more in weight had to lie on the altar in each chief temple. Each priest had to wear the ring on his arm at all assemblies over which he himself presided, having previously reddened it in the blood of the animal which he himself had sacrificed there. Every man who required to do legal business at a law court had first to take an oath on that ring, and name two or more witnesses. "I name [M. and N.] witnesses herein," he had to say, "that I take an oath on the ring, a lawful oath,—so help me Frey and Njörd and the Almighty God, as I shall pursue (or defend) this suit, or bear witness, or give verdict or judgment, according to what I know to be most right and true and in accordance with the law."' In general agreement with this is the account given in *Víga-Glúms Saga*: 'That man who was to take a temple-oath took in his hand a silver ring which was reddened in the blood of the sacrificed ox, and which had to weigh not less than three ounces.' In taking the oath, Glúm is represented as using the words, 'I take a temple-oath on the

ring, and I say to the god,' etc.; here the names of Frey and Njörd are omitted.[1]

While Iceland was being colonised from Norway, the place and number of the temples would depend on the religious zeal of the settlers in the various districts, but when a fixed constitution was adopted in the year 930 special regulations were made with reference to this. 'The land was divided into quarters, and there were to be three places of assembly in each quarter, and three chief temples in each assembly-district. Men who were noted for intelligence and just dealing were selected to have charge of the temples; these had to appoint the law-courts at the assemblies, and to superintend the legal proceedings there. Each man had to give toll to the temple, as they now give toll to the church.' References to the payment of this tax are not infrequent in the sagas, and one of the results of the preaching of Christianity by Thorvald and Bishop Frederic in 981-985 was that in the north of Iceland 'many men abandoned sacrifices and broke their idols, and some would not pay the temple-tax.' We also meet with such remarks as, 'the men of

[1] In the ceremony of entering into 'foster-brotherhood,' each person swore to avenge the other, 'and named all the gods as witnesses.'

Geitland had to maintain half of the temple along with Tungu-Odd.' The chief temples were thus legally endowed religious buildings, but it would appear that there were others which were the private property of individuals, and no doubt many of those which were entitled to legal support were originally erected by the more prominent of the settlers. An interesting case of temple endowment is that recorded of Grím Geitskor, who travelled over all Iceland to find the most suitable spot for holding the yearly assembly. For his trouble he received a 'penny' from every man in the island, and this money he gave to the temples. One of the early settlers in the east of Iceland is recorded as having taken formal possession of an unoccupied piece of land for the behoof of a temple which he had built there.

As has already been mentioned, the inner part of the temple was more particularly the sacred place, where stood the altar and the images of the gods. The main part of the building served as a kind of hall, in which were held the entertainments which followed upon the sacrifices, and at which the flesh of the slain animals was eaten. As in the ordinary halls, there were fires in the middle of the floor and seats down each side. In

some of the sagas dealing with prehistoric times in Sweden mention is made of a *dísar-sal* (in connection with the worship of the *dísir*: see p. 33). What relation this had to the usual temple is not clear: it has been supposed to be no more than another name for the temple-hall, but this is not at all certain.

The temple being a holy place, there were naturally certain restrictions attached to it, of which a prominent one was that no weapons were to be taken inside it. This is clearly illustrated by an incident in *Vatnsdœla Saga*, where Ingimund enters the temple first, and Hrafn the Norwegian follows him, wearing his sword. Then Ingimund turned to him, and said, 'It is not the custom to carry weapons in the temple, and you will come under the wrath of the gods unless you make amends for it.' When Olaf Tryggvason entered the temple of Mærin in Thrandheim, he carried a gold-mounted staff, but his own men and those belonging to the district were weaponless.

Another offence which is frequently mentioned is that of slaying a man in a holy place; in this connection, however, the regular word used is not *hof* but *vé*, which has a more general meaning. One who committed this offence incurred the

penalty of outlawry, and was designated by the name of *vargr í véum*, 'wolf in holy places.' The same view of bloodshed as a crime against the sanctity of a holy place is illustrated in the cases of Thorsness and Stödvar-firth in Iceland, where the killing of anything was forbidden. In the case of Thorsness it was decided, after a battle had taken place there, that it was defiled by the blood that had fallen on it, and 'was now no more holy than other places.'

Along with the timber-buildings known as *hof*, there is frequent mention, both in the historical and legendary sources, of other sacred places called *hörgar*. In its simplest form the *hörg* was evidently a kind of stone-altar or sacrificial cairn standing in the open air; in modern Norwegian and Icelandic the word is applied to a mountain-top. This is most clearly indicated by the words of *Hyndlu-ljóð*, where Freyja says of Ottar, 'He made me a *hörg*, piled up with stones; now these stones are turned to glass. He reddened it in the fresh blood of oxen. Ottar always believed in the goddesses.' In contrast to the burning of temples, the usual expression for the destroying of *hörgar* is 'breaking,' which also indicates a structure of stones. In some cases, however, the name of *hörg* seems to be applied

to something more approaching the nature of the *hof*; this not only appears to be implied in the use of 'timbered,' which occurs in at least two poetic passages, but is also suggested by the wording of the old Norwegian law, 'if a man raises a mound (*haug*), or makes a house, and calls it a *hörg*,' etc. The stone altars or cairns would naturally be more primitive places of worship than the temples, but they continued in use along with these down to the disappearance of the old religion. The altar in the temple, indeed, was no doubt the representative of the earlier and ruder one in the open air, for both are spoken of as being 'reddened' with the blood of the sacrifice.

It has been already made clear that the gods worshipped were represented in the temples by images, which in the historical accounts are called by the names of *líkneski* ('likeness') and *skurð-goð* ('carved gods,' probably an epithet applied by Christians). The description given by Adam of Bremen of those which stood in the temple at Upsala has already been quoted (p. 4); here it is only necessary to add that in no other writing of historical value is there any mention of an image of Odin. With Thor the case is very different. Another image of this deity is mentioned by Adam himself, who relates that about

the year 1030 an English missionary in Sweden found it standing in the assembly-place of the heathens. In his religious zeal he smashed it with an axe, and was at once put to death by the angry worshippers. Images of Thor are also frequently referred to in the Icelandic sagas. In the year 998, when King Olaf Tryggvason was christianising Norway, he entered the temple at Mærin in Thrandheim, 'and when the king came where the gods were, there sat Thor, adorned with gold and silver, and was most honoured of all the gods.' In the fullest account of this incident it is stated that the image was seated in a splendid chariot, to which were harnessed two goats beautifully carved out of wood; both chariot and goats were on wheels, and the cords attached to the goats' horns were of silver. Thor in his chariot is also mentioned as one of the images in the temple belonging to Earl Hákon and Gudbrand in the Dales, which is described in *Njál's Saga*. There is no mention of the chariot, however, in the account of this image given in connection with King Olaf's visit to the Dales in 1021. There it is said to have been 'of great stature, and hollow inside, with the hammer in his hand; under him there is a kind of pedestal or platform, on which he stands when he is out-

side; and on him there is no lack of gold and silver.' This image was carried out to the place where the people of the district held their meeting with Olaf, and those already assembled there paid homage to it. It was set down in the middle of the ground, and on one side of it sat the heathens, and on the other the king and his followers. It is also related that at the battle of Svöldr in the year 1000, Earl Eirík had an image of Thor in the prow of his ship, but threw it aside and put a cross in its place when he found his men unable to board Olaf Tryggvason's vessel.

Mention has already been made (pp. 7-8) of the likeness of Thor carved on the chief pillars of the temple in Mostr, and no doubt similar representations of the god were not uncommon. In that part of the story of Thormod the poet which takes place in Greenland, about 1027, a large chair is described as having on its back an image of Thor with his hammer.

That some at least of the other gods were similarly represented in the temples may be assumed as beyond doubt, but the evidence on this point is very scanty. It seems likely that there was an image of Frey at Thrandheim, and it is highly probable that this god would be largely figured in Sweden, although the texts

in which there is mention of this are of a very legendary character. It is doubtful, also, whether any reliance can be placed on the passage in *Droplaugarsona Saga*, which describes Frey and Thor as sitting on the lower bench in a temple, while Frigg and Freyja occupied the higher. More historical, perhaps, is the image of Frey which ornamented the talisman given by King Harald to Ingimund (p. 25).

In the traditions connected with Earl Hákon there are several references to an image of Thorgerd. The earl is related to have taken Sigmund Brestisson to a secluded building in the forest, in which there were 'a number of gods.' At the inner end of the house was the image of a woman splendidly dressed. What follows is of a legendary character, but the building and image appear again in the story of Olaf Tryggvason, who not only stripped Thorgerd of all her 'gold and silver and good clothes,' but dragged the image at a horse's tail, knocked it to pieces with a club, and finally burned it along with that of Frey. In *Njál's Saga*, Earl Hákon and Gudbrand are said to have had a great temple in the Dales in which there were images of Thorgerd and Irpa; the former was as tall as a full-grown man, and had a large gold ring on her arm and a hood on her

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head. These accounts may have a foundation in fact, but that given in *Harðar Saga* of a temple in Iceland with an image of Thorgerd is probably mere invention, perhaps an echo of the passage in *Njál's Saga*.

CHAPTER IV

CEREMONIES AND MINISTERS OF RELIGION

With regard to the rites of the old Scandinavian religion a considerable amount of information has been preserved, although mainly relating to one part of the subject, the offering of sacrifice. It is clear that this was the central feature in the worship of the gods, and the great means towards propitiating their favour or averting their displeasure. Hence the verb *blóta*, which was the distinctive word for worshipping the heathen gods, very frequently (if not usually) implies the accompaniment of sacrifice; and the noun *blót* similarly means either the act of worship or that of sacrifice. In the case of the verb, the object of worship stands in the accusative case, the thing sacrificed in the dative, the original sense being 'to worship (the gods) with something.' In this killing of living things as an offering to the divine powers lay one of the most obvious differences between the old religion and the new, and

it is consequently one which holds a prominent place in the accounts of the struggle between heathenism and Christianity. One of the first objects aimed at by the kings who adopted the new faith was the suppression of the practice in every form, while the adherents of the old religion clung to it tenaciously as long as they could. Even after Christianity was the established religion of Norway, it was still thought necessary to remind the people that all *blót* were forbidden, whether to 'the heathen gods, mounds, or sacred cairns.' Here and in other passages where the word is similarly employed, it may be assumed that sacrifices are to be thought of as an essential part of the heathen worship.

Sacrifice might be offered either by individuals on their own account, or by some prominent man on behalf of the community. It was, indeed, the duty of the latter to 'keep up the sacrifices,' on which the public peace and prosperity were believed largely to depend. The king as head of his people was especially bound to maintain this religious rite, and the adoption of Christianity by the Norwegian kings naturally brought them into direct collision with the national feeling on this point. When King Hákon in 952 proposed that his subjects should worship Christ, give up the

heathen gods and the sacrifices to them, and keep holy each seventh day, he was met by the reply that they desired him rather to follow the custom of his father, and 'sacrifice for peace and plenty to them.' On the other hand, the importance attached to the practice by the more religious among the people is shown in the case of Loft the Old, who emigrated to Iceland from Gaular in Norway. He 'went abroad every third summer on his own account and that of his uncle Flosi, to sacrifice at that temple in Gaular of which his mother's father, Thorbjörn, had been the custodian.'

The extent to which the common people shared in the expense attendant on such sacrifices seems to have varied according to circumstances. In some cases the offering was a collective one; in others some great man showed his wealth and munificence by providing it entirely from his own resources. Probably the latter course was somewhat exceptional, as Snorri says of Earl Sigurd, that 'he did a thing that was widely famed: he made a great sacrificial feast at Hladir, and stood all the expense of it himself.' This he confirms by citing a verse from a poem in praise of Sigurd, composed by the Icelandic poet Kormak. Otherwise, he states, 'it was the old custom, when

there was to be a sacrifice, that all the householders should come to the place where the temple was, and bring there the provisions they would require while the festival lasted.' According to Adam of Bremen, too, the great festival which was celebrated every nine years at Upsala was maintained by contributions from the whole Swedish people, and attendance at it was compulsory; even those who had adopted Christianity were only exempted on payment of a fine. The national character of the festival is also certified by Snorri, who calls it the 'chief *blót*,' and says it was held to obtain peace and victory for the Swedish king.

The actual sacrifice consisted in the killing of various animals, usually oxen, horses, sheep, or swine, but on special occasions even human beings were offered to the gods. At the great Upsala festival, according to Adam's account, nine male animals of each kind were offered, as well as men; and a Christian eye-witness reported having seen seventy-two carcases of slaughtered men and beasts (dogs and horses) suspended together from the trees of the sacred grove adjoining the temple. Whether this custom of hanging up the bodies of the offerings was practised elsewhere in Scandinavia is unknown,

but the connection between Odin and death by hanging makes it probable that it was more widely known than appears. In Denmark also human victims were offered along with animals; according to Thietmar's chronicle the great gathering in this country took place at Lejre (near Roskilde in Sjælland) every nine years, in the month of January. The sacrifice here consisted of ninety-nine men and as many horses, dogs, and cocks (the latter being offered in place of hawks). How the victims were selected or obtained is not stated; but it is probable that they were usually captives taken in war, criminals, or thralls. In Sweden, indeed, strangers appear to have run some risk of being selected as victims; in 997 the Icelandic poet Hallfred nearly met with this fate. In early times, however, the Swedes were credited with having burned one of their kings in his own house as an offering to Odin, in order to dispel a famine which they believed was due to his slackness in maintaining the sacrifices. One of the early kings was also reported to have offered up nine of his sons in succession to Odin, to obtain long life for himself. In an account of the heathen period in the isle of Gotland, which is given in *Guta Saga*, it is said that 'they sacrificed their

sons and daughters and their cattle. All the land had its highest sacrifices with folk (= human beings), as also had each third (of the country) by itself; but the smaller districts had lesser sacrifices with cattle.'

In Norway and Iceland human sacrifices appear to have been more exceptional, and only resorted to in extreme cases. The usual nature of the victims is clearly indicated by the words assigned to King Olaf Tryggvason in 998, when he found his subjects obstinate in their determination to hold the midsummer *blót*. He then threatened 'to make it the greatest kind of sacrifice that is in use, and offer up men; and I will not choose thralls or criminals, but will select the most distinguished men to give to the gods.' At the very crisis of the conflict between paganism and Christianity in Iceland, in the year 1000, the adherents of the old religion resolved to sacrifice two men out of each quarter, and 'called upon the heathen gods not to let Christianity overrun the country.' Then Hjalti and Gizur held a meeting of the Christians, and said that they would also make an offering of as many men. 'The heathens,' they said, 'sacrifice the worst men, and cast them over rocks or cliffs; but we shall choose the best men, and call it

a gift for victory to our Lord Jesus Christ.' Various methods appear to have been in use besides that mentioned here; at Thorsness, in the west of Iceland, tradition long pointed out the 'doom-ring,' in which men had been adjudged for sacrifice, and the stone within it — called *Thor's stone*—on which they were killed by being broken, 'and the stain of blood is still to be seen on it.' Another source speaks of human victims as having been sunk in a fen close to the temple on Kjalarness, which is supported by Adam of Bremen's statement that near the temple of Upsala was a fountain in which 'a living man' was immersed. A 'sacrificial pit' is also mentioned in *Vatnsdœla Saga*, where one Thorolf was believed to sacrifice both men and cattle. That in exceptional cases the victim may have been of higher standing than the thrall or criminal is possible enough; as late as 985 Earl Hákon in Norway is credited with having given his young son as an offering to Thorgerd, when he prayed to her for victory over the vikings of Jómsborg. In other cases, such as that of Hallstein, who 'gave his son to Thor' in order that the god might send him pillars for his house, the language is ambiguous, and may imply dedication rather than sacrifice. When the

sacrifice consisted of animals which might be used for human food, it was apparently only the blood which was regarded as belonging to the gods. To this was given the name of *hlaut*, and it has already been stated (p. 41) that special bowls were kept to receive it in. It was then smeared or sprinkled by means of twigs, not only upon the altars and the walls of the temples (both outside and in), but also upon the assembled people. The flesh was then boiled in large pots over the fires which burned in the middle of the temple, and was eaten by the worshippers, after being consecrated by the chief man present. A prominent feature, at least of the more important festivals, was the use of horse-flesh for this purpose—a practice so intimately associated with heathenism that its abandonment was strictly prescribed to those who accepted Christianity. This appears in the strongest light in the case of Hákon the Good, who was finally forced to appease his heathen subjects by eating some pieces of horse-liver. In Iceland, however, it was permitted for a few years after the new faith was publicly adopted.

When the drinking began, the horns of ale were carried round the fire and solemnly dedicated to various gods. The first *full* or toast was

assigned to Odin (see p. 18), and was drunk to obtain victory and power for the king. Next came that of Njörd and Frey, for peace and plenty. 'After that it was the custom of many to drink Bragi's *full*. Men also drank to those of their kinsmen who had been famous, and that was called *minni*.' It is possible that this account may be imperfect or inexact, as another passage mentions Thor as well as Odin in this connection. This is a story of how St. Martin appeared in a dream to King Olaf Tryggvason, and said to him: 'It has been the custom of men in this country, as well as elsewhere among heathen people, that ale is given to Thor and Odin, and toasts are assigned to the Æsir, when there is drinking or feasting in common.' The saint then suggests that in place of the old gods Olaf should substitute Martin himself, along with God and His saints. This was actually what took place in Norway and Iceland, a fact which shows how strong a hold on popular feeling the practice must have had. In the early Christian law of Norway it was enjoined that ale was to be brewed for certain festivals, such as All Hallowmas and Christmas, 'and that ale shall be consecrated to Christ and Saint Mary *for peace and plenty*.' Omission to do so was punishable by a fine to the

bishop. In place of drinking to the heathen gods and their departed kinsmen, men now drank the *minni* of Christ, of Mary, of St. Martin, St. Olaf, or other saints, and even of the Holy Ghost, and this practice continued to be observed at wedding-feasts in Iceland as late as the seventeenth century.

The great festivals took place especially at three seasons in the year. One of these was at the close of autumn (about the middle of October) 'to greet the winter.' At mid-winter came the festival of Yule (*Jól* or *Júl*), originally held in the middle of January, but afterwards altered to correspond with Christmas. The third was held at the end of the winter (about the middle of April) 'to greet the summer.' The precise time of each, however, may have varied in different parts of Scandinavia; Adam of Bremen, for instance, represents the great Upsala festival as taking place about the spring equinox, while Snorri places it a little earlier. As late as 1020 these three festivals were still kept up by the majority of the inhabitants in the district of Thrandheim in Norway, and must have been maintained in Sweden for nearly a century later. The return which the worshippers hoped to obtain from the gods for the sacrifices offered was mainly

good seasons, abundant crops, peaceful times, and victory in war if it arose. To some extent each festival appears to have had a special object, but the statements on this point are not quite in agreement with each other. No doubt the desires of the worshippers were expressed in formal prayers offered up by the one who presided over the sacrifices, but no specimen of these has been preserved. Adam of Bremen asserts that in the sacrifices at Upsala use was made of many incantations of an odious character, but of the precise nature of these there is no indication. The drinking of the various toasts was certainly accompanied by formal speeches, of which those used in Iceland at a later date are probably the Christianised representatives.

It is noteworthy that in most of the references to these great religious festivals there is no statement that the sacrifices were offered to any particular deity, the usual expression being simply 'to sacrifice for peace,' etc., or 'to the gods.' The same vagueness sometimes appears when more private offerings are mentioned; it is simply said that the person 'performed a great sacrifice.' It may naturally be assumed, however, that the deity appealed to would vary according to the boon desired, or the preferences of the worshipper.

Adam of Bremen, in fact, states that in event of pestilence or famine the offering was made to Thor; in case of war it was given to Odin; while Frey was the recipient on the occasion of a wedding. The Swedes are also said to have sacrificed to Frey for peace and plenty, and Thorgrim in Iceland honoured the same god at the beginning of winter (p. 26). Earl Hákon's sacrifice to Odin has already been mentioned (p. 16), and is in agreement with Adam of Bremen's statement.

Among the ancient Scandinavians there was no distinct priestly caste. The duty of presiding over religious ceremonies, and of acting as custodian of sacred places, was attached to persons who had also temporal authority of a more or less extensive nature. Highest of all stood the king, on whose attitude towards the gods and their worship the prosperity of his people was believed largely to depend. Next to him came the earls, who in this as in other respects acted as the representatives of the king. Among the titles of honour given by the poets to both kings and earls are those of 'ruler' or 'guardian' of sanctuaries. Finally each district had its recognised religious head in one or other of its most prominent men, whose power as a chief was

naturally augmented in no slight degree by his position as priest. The holder of this double office appears in the Icelandic writings under the name of *goði* (also *hofgoði*), a derivative of *goð* 'god(s)'; it may be assumed that the name was also known in Norway, and its existence in Denmark is certified by its occurrence in Runic inscriptions. The sagas contain numerous references to these priestly chiefs, who are sometimes named after the god whom they specially worshipped (as *Freys-goði*), sometimes after the place where they resided (as *Tungu-goði*), or after those whose religious head they were (as *Ljósvetninga-goði*). By the older constitution of Iceland the number of recognised *goðar* was thirty-nine, distributed pretty equally in the various parts of the island. The office itself was, at least in Iceland, known by the name of *goð-orð*, and was regarded as an item of personal property, which might even be shared by more than one person, so that we find such statements as 'he had a third of the *goð-orð* with Thorgeir.' The right to the office was hereditary, and could also be transferred by one person to another, and this was frequently done, especially when the rightful holder was to be absent from the country for a time. In one case the claimant to a *goð-*

orð is described as performing a ceremony which may have been a usual accompaniment of such transference. He 'said, "we shall redden ourselves in the *goði's* blood in the old fashion," and killed a ram, in the blood of which he reddened his hands, and claimed Arnstein's *goð-orð*.' The *goði* being as much a chief as a priest, the name did not disappear with the adoption of Christianity into Iceland, though it naturally lost its religious associations and thenceforward denoted only the recognised leader in the various districts of the island.

It appears also that women to some extent acted as priestesses, and in Iceland, at least, these were designated by the name of *gyðja*, or *hof-gyðja*, a feminine form corresponding to *goði* and *hof-goði*. In one passage where a Thord *Freys-goði* is spoken of, a female relative of his is also mentioned as being *hof-gyðja*. When the missionary Thorvald was preaching Christianity at Hvamm in the west of Iceland about 984, a certain Fridgerd 'was meanwhile in the temple and performed sacrifice, and each of them could hear the other's words'; then Thorvald made a verse in which he gives the name of *gyðja* to Fridgerd. Other women are also mentioned with this appellation, but the precise place of the priestess,

and her relation to the priest, remains somewhat obscure.

That the public worship of the gods was thus in the hands of the most prominent men in the community, and not merely of a separate priestly class, indicates that the Scandinavian peoples as a whole were really interested in their religion. This is also shown by the thoroughly popular character of the great sacrificial feasts. In earlier times it is probable that the belief in the native gods was strong even to a degree of fanaticism, of which traces are still found in the historic period, especially in Sweden and in the more northerly districts of Norway. The words of Gudbrand already quoted (p. 10) no doubt express a genuine religious attitude common to many worshippers of the Æsir, and similar confessions of faith are to be met with in other accounts. When King Hákon wished his subjects to adopt Christianity, 'and believe in one God, Christ the son of Mary, and abandon all sacrifices and the heathen gods,' there arose a great murmur in the assembly, and the speaker who replied protested against the idea 'that we should abandon that faith which our fathers have had before us . . . and yet this faith has served us well.' Instances have already been given of the strong attachment which indi-

viduals had for certain gods, whom they regarded as their dear and faithful friends, consulted them in all their difficulties, and gave them joint-ownership of their possessions. Others again were zealous in erecting temples and maintaining sacrifices, such as Hall in Thorskafirth, who 'raised a great temple, because Ulf,' the chief man of the district, 'was no sacrificer.' By such men the encroachments of Christianity were naturally regarded with resentment and dismay. At the Althing in Iceland in 996 it was decided that any one blaspheming the gods should be prosecuted by a near kinsman, and for one to be a Christian was reputed a disgrace to all the kindred. Four years later, while the adoption of Christianity was being debated at the Althing, a volcanic eruption was reported from the neighbourhood, whereupon the heathens said, 'It is no wonder that the gods are angry at such talk.' In 1020 the men of Thrandheim held sacrifices after the old fashion, drinking to the gods, killing cattle and horses, and reddening the altars with the blood; this was done on account of a great dearth in that part of Norway, 'and it seemed clear to all men that the gods were angry because they had turned to Christianity.' So late as the twelfth century the people in some parts of Sweden were still

inclined to throw off such Christianity as they had, and revert to the sacrificial rites of the old religion.

On the other hand, it is clear that even in the ninth and tenth centuries the worship of the Æsir was gradually losing its hold. Some of the early settlers in Iceland were either wholly or partly Christian; among the latter were, for example, Helgi the Lean, who believed in both Thor and Christ, and the kinsmen of the Hebridean Örlyg, who 'believed in Columcille, though they were not baptized.' A belief 'in their own might and strength' was all the faith that some of the Scandinavians of this period would own to. Many who came into intercourse with southern peoples accepted the *prima signatio*, or first sign of adoption into the Christian Church. From at least the beginning of the ninth century zealous missionary efforts were made by the Church to supplant Thor and his hammer by Christ and the cross; while, on the other hand, the Scandinavian religion, however strong its hold upon its adherents, never succeeded in spreading beyond its original limits. The combination of all these facts explains the comparatively rapid manner in which the old faith finally succumbed before the new, leaving behind

it only the imperfect traces which have been summed up in these pages, and a mythology which has a profound interest of its own and is inextricably associated with the history of Old Norwegian and Icelandic poetry.

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